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WE CAN'T CONCENTRATE SO WHY SHOULD YOU?

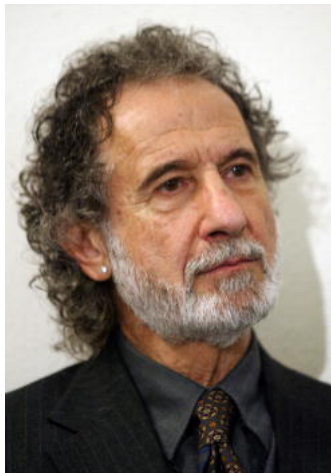
Frank Serpico: The True Story of the Corruption Busting Cop

by Jon Wilde

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35 Comments

Frank Serpico was the New York Cop who blew the whistle on police corruption, survived an assassination attempt and was played by Al Pacino but whatever happened to the man who would only shoot straight?



Mark Wilson
Getty Images News

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Frank Zinnemann's 1952 western is rightfully regarded as one of the mightiest, if not the mightiest, of its genre. In the movie, for which he deservedly won an Oscar, Gary Cooper plays Marshal Will Kane, about-to-retire lawman of a drowsy Western town. He wakes up on the day he is due to marry a woman half his age, played by the impossibly beautiful Grace Kelly. Meanwhile, trouble is brewing. Waiting at the station are three outlaws, the sidekicks of convicted murderer Frank Miller. Fresh out of the slammer, Miller is due in on the noon train with only one thing in mind: to take revenge on Kane, the man who sent him to jail.

Kane hastily attempts to enlist the support of his neighbours in standing up to the imminent threat, but no-one wants to know. As the decisive hour approaches, Kane accepts that he has to act and act alone. Not that he doesn't have his doubts. But overriding those doubts is the darkest understanding of that pre-Socratic maxim: character is destiny. Kane's head tells him to flee town in the direction of a safe future with his new bride. His heart tells him that failure to act will consign him to a future without self-respect or peace of mind. Therefore he must face his enemies with moral courage his only defence.

Like Marshal Will Kane, Frank Serpico was a man with an instinctive understanding of the relationship between character and destiny. In 1971, after a decade spent as a scrupulously honest New York cop, after ten years of refusing to go along with the bribes and shake-downs that went with the job, Serpico finally blew the whistle. Losing all patience with the police bureaucracy and political machinations that thwarted his anti-corruption efforts, putting aside all thoughts of personal safety, he became the first officer in the history of the NYPD to not only report entrenched corruption in its ranks but to voluntarily testify about it in court.

Al Pacino, who famously played Serpico in Sidney Lumet's eponymous 1973 movie, once asked the film's hero why he chose to go the way he did, why he didn't just keep quiet or walk away rather than create a world of trouble for himself. "Because," replied Serpico, if I had just walked away, then who would I be when I listened to Beethoven?" In other words, his character was his destiny. At the decisive moment, Serpico couldn't get out of his own way. Blowing the whistle at considerable risk to himself was not a matter of choice. Self-interest was never an issue. The only motivating force was to be true to himself in order that he be carried forward independently and unequivocally to test the depth of his conviction and the quality of his moral will, to realise his own human potential, to meet his destiny. Simply, he did the right thing. To do the right thing he needed to keep his own promises.

Twelve months after breaking the so-called "blue wall of silence" and seeing his testimony bring down scores of plainclothes cops and high-ranking police officials, Serpico was shot point-blank in the face during a routine drug raid in a Brooklyn apartment building. The circumstances were ambiguous but it was widely believed that he'd been set up by fellow cops. Serpico recovered but his career as a cop was over. One of his last duties was to collect the gold shield awarded to him by the police commissioner as part of his belated promotion to third-grade detective. At the end of the movie High Noon, following the climactic showdown with the four gunmen, Gary Cooper's character rides off into the sunset, bitterly throwing his badge into the dirt as he leaves town. Serpico simply threw his badge into a drawer and forgot all about it.

The threat of reprisals meant that he could never feel completely safe wherever he travelled. Occasionally he'd emerge from under the world's radar to comment on law enforcement issues but, mostly, the second half of his life has been one of silence, exile and a fair amount of cunning. The more invisible he became, so the mythology surrounding him grew exponentially. But Serpico found no solace or rescue in myths, least of all his own. Serpico didn't believe in personal glory. Serpico refused to buy into his own enigma. Only actions counted.

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As far back as he can remember, Frank Serpico wanted to be a cop. As a young kid growing up in Brooklyn, he was gripped by cop shows on the radio, imagining a future where he would be paid to fight the good fight and uphold the law. He often told the story of how a cop once wandered into his father's shoe shop for a shine and left without paying. It is said that there is always a moment in someone's childhood when a door opens and lets the future in. That sounds like Serpico's door opening. "I didn't know why it was wrong for the cop to leave without paying," he'd say, "but I knew it wasn't right. Something told me it was a dishonest thing to do. My idea of a cop was someone who was even more honest than the average Joe. I knew I was going to be a cop and I knew with equal certainty that I'd be a good, honest one."

At eighteen he enlisted in the US Army and served two years in Korea. He then worked as a part-time private investigator and as a youth counsellor while attending Brooklyn College. He was sworn in as a NYPD probationary patrolman in September 1959 and started work in plainclothes the following March. From the very beginning he learned that not every cop believed it was incumbent to adhere to a strict code of conduct. Small-time graft was accepted practice. Early into his police career, a fellow cop stuffed an envelope containing \$300 into his hand and wandered off. Serpico was faced with the choice of keeping the cash and becoming a part of a corrupt system, or reporting the incident to a superior officer. There was only one option. His sergeant kept the cash for himself. Word quickly got round that Serpico was not like other cops, was not to be trusted. Meanwhile he kept his head down, refusing even to accept the customary free meals offered to cops around Brooklyn. He further alienated his colleagues by growing his hair long, wearing a scruffy beard and dressing like a hippie.

In 1966 he requested a transfer to The Bronx where he was assigned to narcotics. Here, cop corruption was even more rampant. One particularly lucrative enterprise involved prostitutes and bookmakers contributing to the cops' payroll to stay in business. Serpico's refusal to accept the grease made him a despised and increasingly ostracised figure in the force.

Serpico was now ploughing a lonely furrow and the stress was beginning to affect his health. Having moved to a bohemian apartment in Greenwich Village with his pet cricket, he kept his occupation secret for fear that neighbours would think he was just another cop on the take. Becoming more and more isolated in the force he feared that he'd become a marked man. His girlfriend of the time later remarked, "The worst thing was watching him to go to work, dreading it. But he couldn't let go of it either. I guess what he wanted more than anything else was just to be a good cop. You wouldn't think that'd be so hard."

He persevered, began to speak up, sharing his concerns with officials at police HQ and with bigwigs at City Hall, only to be bounced between departments, fobbed off with lame excuses. Realising he was getting nowhere fast he teamed up with fellow cop, David Durk, and together they took their story to the New York Times. The ensuing front-page headlines caused a sensation, forcing the resignation of the Police Commissioner and leading to Mayor John Lindsay appointing a special commission to probe police wrongdoing.

Throughout the force it was common knowledge that Serpico was due to testify before a Grand Jury about systematic corruption pay-offs amounting to millions of dollars. In speaking out against fellow police, he was about to violate the holiest of cop codes. If Serpico was expecting to be on the end of intimidation within the force he was not to be disappointed. Reporting for duty one morning, an Irish cop confronted him, pulled out a knife and chillingly remarked, "I ought to cut your tongue out." Undaunted, Serpico pulled out his automatic, pushed the cop to the floor, pressed the gun to his head and screamed, "Move you motherfucker and I'll blow your brains out."

Long before his face got in the way of a bullet during the 1971 drug bust, Serpico must have known that his position in the force was untenable. The aftermath of the shooting simply confirmed it. In his 1973 biography *Serpico*, Peter Maas described the scenes in the Brooklyn precinct houses as news spread of Serpico's shooting. "Crudely scrawled notices appeared on bulletin boards sardonically asking for contributions to hire a lawyer to defend 'the guy who shot Serpico' and to pay for lessons to teach him to shoot better."

Serpico was permanently deafened in his left ear by the gunshot and suffered chronic pain from bullet fragments lodged in his brain. While recuperating in hospital he received a number of hostile messages. One note simply read, "Die You Scumbag". He received a traditional condolence card, amended to read, "With sincere sympathy...that you didn't get your brains blown out, you rat bastard." A friendly colleague dropped round and, in attempting to lift Serpico's spirits, told him that 35 cops had offered to donate blood the night he was shot. "Isn't that great," Serpico replied. "Out of 32,000 cops I've got a total of 32 friends."

Questions continued to be asked about police involvement in the shooting of Serpico but no charges were brought and a police investigation found no evidence of a conspiracy. Meanwhile, rumours circulated that the Mafia had put out a contract on his life as a result of a wire tap on a Mob phone picking up the comment that, "the cop with the beard in The Village was gonna be hit." After twelve years of service, it was time for Serpico to stop being a cop.

He officially retired on 15th June 1972 on a paltry pension of \$12,000 and headed straight to Europe. If he had never been heard of again, his reputation might have been confined to New York where his was a household name, a by-word for honest policing. Then Hollywood came calling.

The lead role in Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* movie was first offered to Robert Redford, who turned it down. It was next offered to Al Pacino, fresh off the back of *The Godfather*, who grabbed it and made it one of his most iconic roles. Serpico was lured back from his exile in Europe by the studio that warned him if he wasn't around to supervise filming, then he wouldn't be able to complain about the finished movie. Serpico's stay on the set was brief. "They wanted me to act in the movie," he later recalled. "They told me it would make things interesting. I said, 'I'm already interesting. And I'm not an actor, I'm the real thing.' Then I walked off the set because they were doing a scene I didn't recognise. I asked the director where they got it from and he said, 'It's real, it happened in my life'. I said 'Well, when you're making a movie about your life, you can put it in, but leave it out of mine!' That was it for me. I walked out and never went back."

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Upon release, the movie was an instant critical and commercial success. To his horror, Frank Serpico became an overnight celebrity.

"That side of things was unexpected," he would say. "Suddenly, wherever I was, people wanted to buy me things. I was recognized all the time. I'd be sitting in a restaurant and strangers would invite me over to join them. But they were more interested in the image than they were in me. I found myself the unwitting victim of people's fantasies. I'd be talking to someone for a while, when all of a sudden I'd realise they're not really speaking to me, they're speaking to Al Pacino."

He quickly returned to Europe and remained there for the rest of the 1970s. A large chunk of time was spent in Holland where he settled on a remote farm with his fourth wife. Said to be suffering from post-traumatic stress, his soul disturbed but not destroyed, he lived quietly but comfortably off the

royalties from the Serpico biography, movie and short-lived TV spin-off series. In 1974, a reporter chanced upon him in an Amsterdam café where he was sipping on gin. Asked how he passed his time Serpico claimed that his days were mostly spent contrasting animal and human behaviour. His principal concern appeared to be the health of swans in Holland's polluted canals. For a period he moved to North Wales, founding a spiritual group called The Order Of The Star which reportedly took care of the bulk of his savings.

Following the death of his wife from cancer he returned to the US in 1980, optimistically resolving to live quietly and safely, away from the glare of newspaper headlines. Within the year his cover was broken during a well-publicised paternity battle in which he claimed he'd been used as a sperm-bank and tricked into making a flight attendant pregnant. The courts decided against him and he was ordered to pay child support out of his police pension.

For a number of years he traveled through the US, Canada and Mexico in a small camper van, with only a sheepdog and a pet mouse for company, detaching himself from ordinary life and from fame. Tracked down by one reporter he admitted that he'd sold all his possessions and was mainly interested in learning to play the harmonica and dance the cha-cha-cha. "People think I'm running away from life and that I'm bitter," he said, "but maybe I have a right to all that." Asked whether he still feared reprisals from other cops he was evasive, saying only that he was more scared of "being discovered" than "getting whacked". On other occasions he has made veiled references to episodes of persecution, including being forced by the FBI to flee Switzerland naked in the snow.

In the mid-80s he settled into a small, solar-powered cabin in the woods of Albany, a hundred miles or so from Manhattan. Down the years his interests have grown ever more esoteric. He has dabbled in Eastern philosophy and widely studied alternative medical treatments. For a period he worked as a massage therapist. He's a keen language student, claiming to be fluent in German, Spanish, French and Italian. He practices meditation and studies African drumming. Having taken lessons at an art school in Massachusetts he is said to be an enthusiastic sculptor. Occasionally he has acted on stage in local theatrical productions.

As the years have flown by, he claims to spend less and less time looking over his shoulder but maintains that his privacy is paramount. In terms of reclusiveness, he's hardly in the JD Salinger league, even allowing a film crew into his home on one occasion. Then he's known to make unannounced appearances at public events.

The first of these came in 1997 when he turned up at New York's City Hall to lend his support for a new independent body that would investigate complaints made by police about corruption in the local department. Sporting a pony-tail and wearing a conservative business suit tucked into cowboy boots, he might have passed for a roadie with Willie Nelson's touring band. As he began to speak, there was no mistaking that the fire within remained undimmed, that he still had a compulsive need to speak what he saw as the truth.

Sixteen years had passed since Serpico's retirement and, while crime figures plummeted in New York, the general public perception was that the NYPD had meanwhile evolved into one of the country's cleanest forces. Serpico had arrived back in town to remind anyone who would listen that police corruption in New York was not exactly a thing of the past. Citing the notorious cases of Brooklyn's 75th Precinct in 1992 and the so-called "Harlem Dirty 30" in 1994 he argued that, "The mentality today is just the same. It's OK to be corrupt. Just don't get caught. We must create an atmosphere where the crooked cop fears the honest cop, and not the other way around. This is not the time to be complacent."

His warning was nothing if not timely as a new wave of corruption scandals were about to break in the US. There was the late-90s Rampart Scandal in which more than seventy LAPD officers, some of them on the pay-roll of hip-hop mogul Suge Knight, were implicated in serious offences ranging from unprovoked beatings and framing of suspects to bank robbery. In 2003 federal law enforcers uncovered New York's biggest corruption cases in years, involving a ring of rogue cops who had stolen more than \$2m from drug dealers. In 2005, two NYPD detectives were charged with misusing the authority of their badges to become hit men for the mob.

In the past ten years Serpico has avoided the public glare, preferring to put the world to rights **via his official blog**. In January 2010 he was briefly lured out of the shadows, granting an interview with the **New York Times** during which he revealed that he had finally started work on his autobiography, provisionally entitled Before I Go. "It's getting close to the line," he says, referring to the fact he turns 74 in April, "so I figure I better get busy." As much as his distant past defines him, it continues to haunt him. "I still have nightmares. I open a door a little bit and it explodes in my face. Or I'm in a jam and I call the police, and guess who shows up? My old cop buddies who hated me."

To the dirty cops he brought down Serpico will always be a rat. To the rest of us, he'll always be a hero albeit, like Gary Cooper's High Noon lawman, a most reluctant sort of hero.

"The only thing I feel I ever accomplished," Serpico has always maintained, "is that I did what I had to do. To improve the world, all of us must begin with ourselves."